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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3753

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3252

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3462

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001736

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO

P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLEBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GENERAL PETRAEUS REVIEWS LAF COMMANDER'S TALKS WITH SYRIA

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) On December 2, Commander, U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Jean Kahwagi to discuss bilateral and regional military cooperation issues. General Petraeus pledged continued support for the LAF and said Lebanon was one of the priority countries identified by CENTCOM for military assistance programs. He provided General Kahwagi with a briefing on recent developments in Iraq and asked Kahwagi to urge his interlocutors in Damascus to stem the flow of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq. General Kahwagi said that his discussions in Damascus on November 29 had focused on border control, efforts to stop smuggling, and counter-terrorism intelligence sharing and training cooperation. He termed his discussions "productive." Kahwagi reiterated that he had traveled to Syria at the request of the Cabinet and Prime Minister. Though there has been some criticism of Kahwagi's trip from March 14 political leaders, both PM Siniora and Kahwagi confirmed to General Petraeus that a full account of the discussions has been relayed back to the GOL. Kahwagi also confirmed that Defense Minister Elias Murr plans to travel to Damascus before the end of the year. Finally, Kahwagi confirmed that the LAF had not observed any unusual Hizballah maneuvers south of the Litani recently, despite Israeli reports to the contrary. End Summary.

"The U.S. Will Do All It Can To Help"

¶2. (C) General Petraeus began by congratulating General Kahwagi on his appointment as LAF Commander and pledged that the U.S. would continue to do all it could to help Lebanon. General Petraeus added that plans had been approved to place additional U.S. military personnel at U.S. Embassy Beirut to help support the growing military assistance programs.

¶3. (C) Turning to specific items on the military assistance agenda, General Petraeus commented that:

-- One Caravan (fixed wing, close air support aircraft)

should be delivered before the Spring 2009 parliamentary elections;
-- Discussions were ongoing for the acquisition and upgrade of 67 M60 tanks from Jordan (with 10 delivered prior to Spring elections), although funding would have to come from a third country;
-- Hughes 500 helicopters were being explored as an alternative to the Jordanian COBRAS, which the LAF had recently decided against acquiring;
-- Plans were underway to increase the number of Joint Combined Training Exercises (JCET) from six per year up to eight;
-- Discussions on special forces capabilities would continue during the December 8 visit of the SOCCENT commander; and
-- Efforts were underway to provide the LAF with RAVEN unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

¶14. (C) General Petraeus noted that Lebanon receives \$2.5 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds -- second only to Jordan in the CENTCOM area of responsibility. In addition, \$1.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) has been provided for training. General Petraeus invited General Kahwagi to visit Tampa next time he is in the U.S. and promised to talk with JCS Chief Admiral Mullen and see when it was possible for him to invite Kahwagi to visit the U.S.

Foreign Fighters Still a Problem in Syria

¶15. (S) After briefing General Kahwagi on the decreasing

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levels of violence in Iraq, General Petraeus emphasized that the U.S. remained deeply concerned about the transit of foreign fighters into Damascus and through Syria into Iraq. "President Assad himself knows about this problem and USG officials have spoken to him about it," said General Petraeus. He used the case of Badran Turki al Hishan (aka Abu Ghadiyah) as a key example of USG concerns. General Petraeus added that the Syrian Military Intelligence knew exactly how these terrorists were operating in Syria. "All of this makes it difficult to have a dialogue with them," he said.

Visit to Syria Was Sanctioned by GOL,
Political Factions and Even the Patriarch

¶16. (C) General Kahwagi related his November 29 discussions in Damascus with Syrian Chief of the General Staff Lt. General Ali bin Muhammad Habib Mahmud, Syrian Defense Minister Lt. General Ali Hassan Turkmani, and President Assad. Kahwagi's visit drew criticism from some March 14 political leaders in Lebanon. "I work for the Government of Lebanon and I was instructed to go," said Kahwagi. Kahwagi told us that he had had the approval of Minister of Defense Murr, "various political factions" in Lebanon, and even the Maronite Patriarch for the trip. He noted that Parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri had been made aware of his intent to travel to Damascus. Finally, he confirmed that Minister of Defense Elias Murr would travel to Damascus for bilateral discussions by the end of the year. Note: Prime Minister Siniora has publicly defended General Kahwagi, saying Kahwagi had acted at the request of both the Council of Ministers and President Sleiman. Siniora went further by saying the agenda of topics had been cleared before departure and that a full report on the discussions had been provided to the Government of Lebanon by General Kahwagi. End Note.

"Syrians Also Concerned About Religious Extremists"

¶17. (C) General Kahwagi explained that his discussions in Syria had focused on border control issues, efforts to combat smuggling and counter-terrorism cooperation. "There are only

four formal border crossings in the north, but 39 off-road, informal crossing points. The Syrians have deployed their troops along the northern border to exert more control over these informal crossing points."

¶8. (C) General Kahwagi believes that Syrian concern about extremists has prompted this increased focus on border security. Speaking specifically about Fatah Al-Islam's Abd al-Ghani (Jahwar), the Syrians believed that he twice illegally entered Syria from Lebanon, assembled explosives and then returned to Lebanon to stage two of the recent attacks in the city of Tripoli. General Kahwagi said that President Assad had expressed personal concern about this type of activity and the links to groups such as Fatah al-Islam.

Foreign Fighters

¶9. (C) General Petraeus asked General Kahwagi to stress to his Syrian interlocutors their behavior was unhelpful and a crackdown on foreign fighters to Iraq could make a difference in the U.S.-Syrian relationship. "We know for a fact that Syrian Military Intelligence Director Asif Shawkaf is aware of this issue, as is President Assad," he said. General Kahwagi noted he was merely reporting the contents of his discussions, without providing opinions on the veracity of the Syrian claims. Kahwagi added that he thought he thought Assad knew that those extremists also constituted a threat to his regime.

"We Are Pursuing Terrorists Here in Lebanon"

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¶10. (C) General Kahwagi assured General Petraeus that terrorists were being pursued in Lebanon. The LAF has been extremely close to capturing the Fatah al-Islam figure Jahwar, arriving at his safe house three hours after the suspect fled and finding a wig and women's clothes to show that he was adopting a disguise. Kahwagi also said that there was confirmed information that Usamah Amin Shehabi and Abd al Rahman Muhammad were hiding in the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp. "We will get them, though."

No Hizballah Activity South of the Litani River

¶11. (C) In response to a query from the Ambassador, Kahwagi reported that there had been no unusual Hizballah maneuvers south of the Litani on Lebanese Independence Day. Despite Israeli claims to the contrary, he said neither the LAF nor UNIFIL observed any unusual activity. In response to the Ambassador's query on the reported Iranian offer of military assistance to the LAF, Kahwagi said he had no further information.

Meeting Participants

¶12. (SBU) Participants in the meeting were:

General Jean Kahwagi
LAF Commander
COL Edmond Homsey
LAF Foreign Liaison Officer

Michele Sison
U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon
General David Petraeus
Commander, U.S. Central Command
Colonel Michael Iverson
USA, USCENTCOM CG Executive Officer
Major Ronald Clark,

USMC, USCENTCOM CG Aide de Camp
Michael Gfoeller, DOS
USCENTCOM Political Advisor
Colonel Michael Bell
USA, USCENTCOM CAG
Sadi Othman
USCENTCOM CG Senior Advisor
LTC David Leinberger
Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation
LTC Robert Paddock
USCENTCOM Lebanon Desk Officer
Jacqueline Ward
Special Assistant to the Ambassador

¶13. (SBU) This message has been cleared by General Petraeus.

SISON